

Ambulance Fee Referendum Defeated

Despite a county-wide push from Leggett and Bowers, voters shoot down fee for ambulance rides.

By [Ryan McDermott](#) | [Email the author](#) | November 3, 2010

A contentious ballot measure to charge for ambulance rides in Montgomery County was voted down in Tuesday's general election. With all 248 precincts reporting the ambulance fee referendum was defeated 53.83 percent to 46.17 percent.

The fee would have generated \$14 million toward the county's budget shortfall according to supporters, but those against the fee said it would deter people from calling ambulances.

The county will have to find the \$14 million elsewhere and County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), who was a big supporter of the fee, said the money would come from cuts to fire and rescue services.

Leggett's spokesman, Patrick Lacefield, said the county executive was not trying to stir up fear by saying 11 ambulances would be decommissioned and 89 career firefighters would be laid off.

"We've been cutting for four years," Lacefield said. "There is no low-hanging fruit. Nonessential travel has been long gone."

For a county-wide election that was all but decided in the primaries, the ambulance fee ballot question has been one that has elicited strong voices on both sides of the issue. The battle was fought on streets and in the courts.

Both sides have been extremely vocal, out campaigning through early voting and on Election Day. Leggett, Montgomery County Fire Chief Richard Bowers and career firefighters fought for the ambulance fee, saying it would generate \$14 in revenue to help with the county's budget shortfall, while the volunteer firefighters said the fee would dissuade residents from calling an ambulance.

Councilman Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3) has been the most vocal county council opponent. He has echoed the sentiments passed on by the Montgomery County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Association.

"The insurance companies will raise rates," Andrews said. "They aren't in this for charity."

Andrews also claimed Leggett had tried to push the ambulance fee through in an omnibus budget bill in 2009 and then again in 2010.

But supporters have rejected what Andrews and county volunteer firefighter association said about insurance hikes and people not calling for ambulances because of the fees.

The defeat might be attributed to misinformation about the ambulance fee, Lacefield said.

"We're not billing people, we're not even billing co-pays. We're already paying into our insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid," volunteer medic Pamela Boe said at [an event Monday morning with Bowers at the Public Services Training Academy in Rockville](#). Boe has been vocal in her support of the ambulance fee, which breaks from her association's official view against the fee.

The county council originally passed the fee in May, but opponents, led by the county volunteer fire association, rallied to have the issue put on the November general election ballot. The Montgomery Circuit court ruled against the referendum petition, but the Maryland Court of Appeals overturned the circuit court ruling and the referendum was put on the ballot.

Then Friday, the volunteer fire association, led by Executive Director Eric Bernard, filed suit in Montgomery County Circuit Court saying Leggett and Bowers were misusing county funds by having on-duty, career firefighters handing out pro-ambulance fee literature and by hanging pro-ambulance fee signs on county buildings and vehicles. Judge Robert Greenberg [dismissed the injunction](#) Monday.

Referendum on Law Enacted by County Council (248 precincts reporting, with winning answered in bold below)

Emergency Medical Services Transport Fee

Shall the act to require the collection of an emergency medical services transport (ambulance) fee from: (1) county residents to the extent of the resident's insurance coverage, and (2) non-county residents subject to a hardship waiver become law?

QUESTION A

VOTES PERCENT Yes 116,173 46.17 **No** 135,434 53.83